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# THE FUNCTIONAL VALUE OF DOCTRINES OF THE ATONEMENT

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## I

Volumes upon the atonement are all but innumerable, and among them are several good historical treatments. With the exception of Franks' *History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ* no English work is comparable with the volume of Dean Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*. The volume is made up of the Bampton Lectures delivered in 1915, in that strange world which was before the war. It is an example of solid and sane British learning. Dean Rashdall's use of materials, especially the teachings of church fathers prior to Augustine, is satisfactorily complete, although it is to be regretted that Scholastic and Reformation teachings are not expanded on the scale of those dealing with earlier theories.

The volume is historical in its encyclopedic ability to arrange details in masses, and in its capacity to see events in causal relations. Particularly in the treatment of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, does the treatment rise even higher in that it sees relations between doctrine and the contemporary social mind. But Dean Rashdall's prevailing interest is a legitimate desire to find an interpretation of the death of Christ which shall be acceptable to modern thinkers. At this point his historical knowledge is the basis of his criticism and his theology. He properly makes moral appeal and revelation the center of the New Testament interpretation of the death of Christ. This moral estimate he

discovers persisting throughout Christian history although obscured by reference to substitutionary, penal suffering and the satisfaction of God's honor or justice. His own view is expounded at length in his concluding chapter. He finds it expressed in the words of Abelard and especially in those of Peter the Lombard: "So great a pledge of love having been given us, we are both moved and kindled to love God who did such things for us; and by this we are justified, that is, loosed from our sins we are made just. The death of Christ therefore justifies us, inasmuch as through it charity is stirred up in our hearts." Or to put it in a sharp antithesis, Jesus did not save because he died, but he died because he saved. And this messianic work as savior lies in his teaching as truly as in his death. "The atonement is the very central doctrine of Christianity in so far as it proclaims and brings home to the heart of man the supreme Christian truth that God is love, and that love is the most precious thing in human life."

With this statement few of us would disagree. But, even if we give Christ the divine significance Dean Rashdall ascribes to him, have we in it the complete meaning which the various doctrines of the atonement have sought to embody? It does not seem to me that we have. For each of these doctrines has had the same specific function. It has endeavored not only to set forth God's saving, forgiving love, but also *to meet objections springing from contemporary moral practice directed against his moral right to forgive.*

A historian of doctrine who wishes also to be a constructive theologian must not separate doctrines from their socially functional purpose. Again and again Dean Rashdall comes within sight of recognizing this, and occasionally he formulates what might become a germinal thought for such an evaluation of the material which he is treating. But he never quite recognizes that the truth of a doctrine lies in its function rather than its definition, in its success in ministration to a need of the Christian community rather than in its vocabulary.

The foundation for the historical study of the Christian religion is the recognition of loyalty to and faith in Jesus as savior as the vital center of Christianity. Men who have this faith, however, have never been able to use permanently a formula with which they express one or more of its aspects. Christian faith has always been subjected to questions which sprang from different angles of interest, different social circumstances, and different world-views. Particularly is this true of formulas not given full dogmatic standing but forming a part of the religious inheritance of the Christian community. Therein has lain the need of further exposition and defense. Thus the doctrine-making process as a whole can be described as a series of attempts to legitimize intellectually the Christian religion as held by some society of Christians. The doctrines of the atonement are perhaps the best illustration of this process.

Every doctrine in its earliest period is both apologetic and a means of preserving the integrity of some religious society. It not only seeks to defend faith but also to exclude from a group those whose experience or intellectual beliefs are of a different sort. A doctrine prevails in Christian history as long as it satisfies the religious needs of some creative social mind. Orthodoxy represents the doctrines that have satisfied the successive social minds that made western civilization. Dogma is such doctrine as has been given authority by dominant religious groups, often because of motives and powers quite other than theological. But whatever the course of events resulting in such authority, doctrines at the start at least had functional capacity. They protected religious faith from misinterpretation and attack as well as conserved the solidarity of the group holding them—in the case of orthodoxy this group being the Catholic church.

The theological meaning of the death of Christ has never been erected into any dogma like those contained in the Nicene and Caledonian creeds. It has never been standardized, and to this day it is susceptible of a number of interpretations,

any one of which would be regarded as scriptural. But this is not to say that these interpretations are functionally different. Whoever sees in Christianity a developing religion conditioned by and expressing social forces, finds in the doctrines of the atonement the expression of a permanent value vastly greater than the concepts in which it has been expressed. For all these doctrines spring from and variously express the desire to make clear that God's forgiveness does not contravene his moral order.

It is from this point that in the search for its permanent value the history of the atonement can most intelligently be written, and on its results a doctrine for our day can most confidently be based. The elements of that history are simple and biblical. Christians are conscious of having been saved by faith in Jesus, who had been crucified and had been raised from the dead. If conscious of salvation they have been assured of forgiveness—the conclusion which Paul so urgently argued in Galatians and Romans. But when one thinks of forgiveness he at once recalls preconditions to forgiveness in social practices. Not only that, but he begins to query whether those preconditions have been met in the forgiveness of God which he enjoys. Unless they have been met, such forgiveness must appear morally unjustifiable. Each and every doctrine of the atonement is an answer to the need of such moral justification of God's gracious act.

The social origin of a doctrine of the atonement is thus apparent. Customs followed in the forgiveness of injuries are extended to God's action. He, like kings and common men, finds therein the conditions which make forgiveness moral. God's pardon, like men's, is justified by conforming to those social presuppositions which insure the maintenance of rights, law, honor, or sovereignty. God is conceived of as forgiving in accordance with socially approved practices. This makes his action morally acceptable to those who recognize the legitimacy of such conditions.

## II

1. The New Testament exposition of the death of Christ illustrates this fact. The Christians were conscious of having received a new life in Christ. This they argued must indicate forgiveness, or in messianic terms, acquittal at the coming judgment. Here was a reconciliation with the deity which at first glance ran counter to the universal conditions of obtaining reconciliation. Jesus had justified belief in God's readiness to forgive by pleading parental analogies. But this analogy failed to satisfy his disciples. Recourse was made to other customs. Among both Jews and Greeks God's forgiveness was conditioned upon sacrifice. This sacrificial gift was accepted by the priest in the name of the god. The reconciliation was regarded as complete. This social practice was so universal as to determine the exposition of forgiveness on the part of God and its basis. There must have been a sacrifice. The Jewish Christians at first insisted that such sacrifices as were provided by the Mosaic Code should be offered. Paul's reply was that Christ was the Passover. Thus from a social practice there was drawn an analogy which helped Christians to make intellectually acceptable the grace of God which had already been shed abroad in their hearts. The preconditions of divine forgiveness had been met. How far this sort of apologetic can go is to be seen in the letter to the Hebrews, where the analogy tends to literalization, and Christ is given both the value of a sacrifice and that of the priest.

To say that this conception as set forth in the New Testament is of a piece with theological dogma is quite to distort its significance. In a world where divine forgiveness was conditioned by sacrifice, the forgiveness which had come was naturally considered dependent on sacrifice. It is interesting to note that Paul's explanation of the death of Christ is always figurative, for to him as to us the death of Christ as a sacrifice does not fulfil the ordinary conception of sacrifice. He was not offered by those forgiven on an altar nor by a priest. As a

matter of fact, his death was an execution. But the analogy helped to make God's act appear moral (Rom. 3:23-25).

Dean Rashdall finds substitutionary elements in the Pauline teaching. Undeniably there are expressions of Paul which are susceptible of such interpretation, but it is also clear that Paul never enlarges upon the substitutionary meaning of the death of Christ, and in my own opinion, it would be possible to explain all of his so-called substitutionary references as drawn from the practice of sacrifice.

2. While sacrifice continued as a social practice, it carried a definite meaning, and the church was content to refer to the death of Jesus as sacrificial. All the pertinent material in the patristic literature makes this apparent. There is no standardized exposition, nor is there any attempt at dogma making. Even when appeal is made to the Old Testament, it is not so much for the purpose of discovering an interpretation of the death of Christ as an argument to prove that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecy. The prophets had foretold that the Messiah was to die; Jesus had died.

Beyond this interpretation of the death of Christ as satisfying the requirements of divine forgiveness set by current customs of worship, and as fulfilling prophecies, the early interpretation of the death of Christ made use of other social practices but above all that of releasing captives through payment of a ransom. The New Testament had spoken of Christ's death as a ransom. It never says to whom the ransom was to be paid, nor is a fair interpretation of the various references to ransom likely to show anything more than the high cost of doing a great service to someone else. But when the preacher appeared and effort was made to give something like practical bearing to the death of Christ beyond the allusion to it as sacrifice, the figure of ransom at once attracted attention. It is a military practice with which all the ancient world was familiar. The captive was held by his captor until ransomed. Here lay an explanation of the death

of Christ. In some mysterious way God recognized that Satan had control of pre-Christian believers in the underworld. Christ died that he might give his life as a ransom to Satan for these incarcerated worthies, and then broke away because of his divine power. It is not necessary to recount the various ingenious and sometimes shocking ways in which this dramatic illustration is evolved into something approaching a doctrine. They vary from the rather noble conception of Irenaeus (for here I venture to differ from Dean Rashdall's estimate), to the mouse-trap and fish-hook interpretations of the later Fathers. But the service which the analogy rendered is plain. The release of Old Testament worthies, not to mention possible others, presented a question demanding answer. That they had been saved was beyond question. Christ's death as a ransom to Satan helped the church to justify the church's confidence in that fact. The custom of the battle field and the slave mart was translated to a superhuman transaction between God, Satan, and Christ. Satan had to be persuaded to waive his rights and release his captive. It certainly is an effective bit of *haggadah* as any reader of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* can testify. That it had functional power is evident enough from its persistence until the twelfth century, in the thought and apparently with the respect of practically all the church fathers.

3. But sooner or later it was bound to lose its power, as Christian thinking passed over from the consideration of salvation as the giving of immortality to the judicial conception born of Latin Christianity. From the day of Augustine onward, theology became increasingly a transcendentalized politics—a pardoning of sins. Transactions of the state were read into religion, both in the organization and administration of the church, and in the doctrines which were enunciated by the church. In the same proportion as the judicial and political ideas developed did Christian doctrines need new defense. These doctrines had accumulated as means of protecting the Christian faith, but had of themselves become



identified with that faith. This made the apologetic task of the twelfth century more difficult than that of the third century. Practices of the church served as a stabilizing and even dominant defense of many of these doctrines, for men always hold tenaciously ideas which lie back of customs. The transformation of the dogmas into church life, rites, creeds, and customs, served to protect the faith as delivered to the twelfth century by the past, but they did not meet objections raised by those who were outside the Christian community. To commend to them the incarnation, one could not appeal to the Bible, but must find something in the incarnation itself capable of meeting the objections to it. It was just this which Anselm set forth in his *Cur Deus Homo*. He did not in that tract undertake to show that there had been an incarnation and that the incarnate God-man had died a sacrifice to sinners. All that was included in the Christian dogma and buttressed by the Christian practice. What he endeavored to do was to find an argument for the incarnation that should have functional worth with "infidels." Again the argument is an extension of social practice as a means of understanding the relations between God and man. The explanation Anselm finds in the conditions demanded by forgiveness. He assumes the unquestioned view of feudal society that injury to one's honor demands satisfaction. This satisfaction in the case of God would be that of an infinite honor. Without it forgiveness was impossible. It required a man given infinite value to make such satisfaction, since man who had done the injury alone could render it. Therefore the Son of God became a man, so to suffer that it would be permissible for him to forgive sinners.

It will be noticed that this inhibition to forgiveness seems not to have been recognized by a civilization which was not feudal. The difficulty which feudal society saw in human forgiveness they read into divine forgiveness. The requirements by which that difficulty of forgiveness is resolved in

social practice is raised as a presupposition into a doctrinal explanation of the right of God to forgive. Love is thus seen to meet the requirements of what was unquestioned morality. And despite differences this presupposition is to be found in Scotist as well as Thomist theologies, and extends its unbiblical, baneful influence over theology to our own day. Whenever it is preached men are asked to believe that the Heavenly Father is no freer to forgive than was a feudal lord. Yet, when such belief exists that God cannot forgive until his honor is satisfied, the Anselmic view gives moral grounds to divine forgiveness.

4. Probably the most striking difference between the Europe of feudal power which Anselm served, and the Europe of the sixteenth century is the appearance of the national king. Monarchy in the nationalist sense was a new phenomenon in history. There had been kings and emperors, but never a sovereign like those of the sixteenth century. When the national replaced the feudal order, the power of punishing became almost the essence of the new monarchy. Sovereign right had to be maintained by the enforcement of the sovereign's law. The legitimacy of a king's government was deemed in proportion to his ability to punish those who refused to respond to the royal law as dispensed by the king's judges and enforced by the king's officers. There was always danger lest pardon should argue fear of one's administration. The king might be merciful, but he had to be just. The days of the arbitrary personal rule of oriental monarchs was replaced by statutory control, enforced by fear.

It is easy to see how this social attitude extended itself to the idea of divine administration. God was supreme sovereign; he maintained his authority by punishment. The world was rebellious and the world was under his displeasure. If he elected some to enjoy his favor and forgave them their share in universal rebellion, it was because the punishment due them had been inflicted on their representatives. God, like the king,

could be merciful, but he was compelled to be just, that is, punitive. His punitive justice as well as his honor had to be satisfied. From this point of view, the striking sermons of Luther and the closely argued expositions of Calvin are explicable and representative. The only hope which any member of a condemned race could have under a sovereign capable of administering punishment was that his punishment had fallen on one capable of satisfying a sovereign God's obligation to punish every infraction of his law. That this punishment fell on an innocent person did not weaken its effect. Divine punishment had followed human disobedience; God's punitive justice was satisfied; he was free to forgive those whose punishment had been borne by Christ. Thus the substitutionary doctrine came to a world which could not believe that free pardon was compatible with justice. It is to be borne in mind that the underlying motive was not to find a way in which God might forgive, for there never was any question as to his forgiveness of those who had faith. The real difficulty was how to make plain to minds obsessed with the punitive obligation of a sovereign that the divine sovereign had a moral right to pardon. And such a difficulty the reformation doctrine of the atonement met and continues to meet where men still think of God under the rubrics of sixteenth-century monarchy.

As a phase of this extension of political inhibitions into the field of divine forgiveness, mention need be made only of the theory of Grotius. It is more philosophical than that of the reformers, and more in accord with the general social tendency which was producing democracy. With Grotius there was the presupposition that any relaxation of punishment would bring law into discredit. It was natural that a social order just beginning to feel the significance of law as such should have these apprehensions. Even more was it to be expected that, as the idea of democracy developed, anxiety for the maintenance of social authority should be felt.

This anxiety was carried over into theology. God had forgiven, but he must needs punish in order to vindicate the sovereignty of his law. It was not necessary from such a point of view that the identical punishment of sinners should be borne by Jesus. It was enough that his suffering was judged of sufficient worth to exhibit God's respect for the inviolability of his law. He was free to forgive those who had violated the law, because sovereignty of law had been vindicated in the eyes of the world.

Here the function of the doctrine of the atonement is evident. God is not made propitious by the death of Christ. His punitive justice is less threatened than his status as a law-giver. Christ's death maintains the sovereignty of his law, and therefore the pardon of God is seen to be in accord with those conditions which in a political realm would make pardon defensible. The inhibition to forgive lest his love should be mistaken for disregard of law has been removed. God's moral integrity has been vindicated in human opinion.

5. In the eighteenth century the bourgeois class sought to replevin natural rights. Their success was also a triumph of commercialism. These two elements of a creative social mind set up their own qualifications for every sort of forgiveness. A debt, whether of rights or money, had to be paid. Until this was done a debtor was at the mercy of his creditor. The debt could be paid only by the actual transfer of assets. If the debtor himself could pay, he became free from the debt. If he could not, someone else could pay if he were able and disposed. From the middle of the seventeenth century, theology became unconsciously commercialized. Obedience became a debt, and good deeds in excess of obligations became transferable merit. The need of something in Protestant thought to offset the effective penitential system of Rome contributed to this commercialization. In the original Reformation movement faith had been counted for righteousness; in the course of time it was the righteousness

of Christ that was so counted. The relations of man to God were expressed in terms of debtor and creditor. Justification became a kind of book-keeping. The merits of Christ were transferred to the sinner, and what was lacking in the sinner's righteousness was thus supplemented. The possibility that God could forgive a sinner depended upon the existence of that which could be transferred to the sinner's credit. The theologians easily found the death of Christ not only substitutionary and sacrificial, but his righteousness and merits were transferable to men. Thus again the grace of God in the act of forgiveness was deemed to be vindicated ethically. He was free not to punish the sinner because the sinner's debt had been paid. The methods of the court and of the accounting room suggested and removed moral objections to God's right to pardon.

### III

Thus these typical doctrines of the atonement have for their main purpose to make plain to the believer that God has met the conditions which any given social order sets to the act of pardon and forgiveness. As the conception of social morality varies, the doctrine of the atonement itself varies, in order to show effectively the integrity of God's action. His life is not mere good nature. His forgiveness is law-abiding. Doctrines of divine forgiveness are drawn from social experience which at the moment is socially creative. As social custom lays less emphasis upon inhibitions to forgiveness, and under the inspiration of Jesus' own teaching theology emphasizes the necessity of forgiveness in immediate response to repentance, it is clear that the doctrine of the atonement will continue to assume new forms. It is quite impossible to convince a man who understands the teaching of Jesus, that forgiveness must wait upon the establishment of certain conditions outside of the desire of reconciliation. Our penal code is recognizing the right of pardon, or at least parole,

for those persons who have shown any indications of reformation. The appeal to physical force in education and family discipline is being rejected by those who have discovered the better way. In other words, in our modern world social inhibitions to pardon, such as marked prior civilizations, have all but disappeared. We can no longer find sovereignty sufficient to express our belief in God's position in the cosmos. Outgrown political practices and concepts no longer function as means of co-ordinating our religious faith with our thinking and our social order.

Yet we still find ourselves seeking to justify the ethical meaning of God's forgiveness by such standards as our own social practice demands. Are we not seeking to determine the proper method of pardoning criminals and personal and international enemies? Out from this attempt there are sure to arise tests which we shall unconsciously demand the love of God must meet if it is to satisfy our ethical sense. Its morality will be determined by our idea as to what seems to us to constitute morality. That is to say, any theory of the atonement which is simply an expression of God's love, will not satisfy the man who is keenly aware of the evil in the world, both individual and social. He will demand that the forgiveness of God shall be shown to be of such a sort as does not leave evil a free field or substitute indifference for moral direction. Just what that sort of atonement doctrine will be I have not space to set forth, although the teaching of Jesus will be its heart and center. But functionally I am convinced that it will be the same as these former doctrines. It must satisfy the moral sense of our own day. Such satisfaction can lie only in a theory which indicates the relationship of love and reformation to evil and degeneration. Whether or not individual teachers and preachers may like to admit it, no theology will function satisfactorily in the Christian community unless in some way it brings divine-human relations under the general categories of social sanctions and inhibitions.

It is from this point of view that it seems to me that Dean Rashdall has failed to grasp how significant for constructive thinking are the materials which he has so admirably set forth. A moral influence theory is good so far as it goes, but no doctrine of the atonement is likely to function in our world which does not integrate the divine forgiveness with our best moral practices. The beliefs that God needs a sacrifice of some sort to be propitious, that he is a sovereign with an honor that needs to be satisfied, that he is under a necessity to punish whether or not he chooses to be merciful, or that in some way it is possible to transfer merit and righteousness from Jesus to other individuals, reflect past ideas which have proposed moral impediments to the forgiveness of God. They have functioned; creative concepts must supplant them. Already God's forgiveness is beginning to be set forth from one or more of the social attitudes which determine our morality. As the total Christian movement becomes affected by the social readjustments, these formulas will naturally grow helpful. They will meet the need men feel of being convinced that God's love is moral. These formulas some day will doubtless be outgrown in the same way that their predecessors have been outgrown, but they will accomplish for our day what these other views accomplished for their day. They will serve to remove from the mind of the Christian difficulties in believing in the divine forgiveness, which are the outgrowth of pardon-practices in our own social order. They, like their predecessors, will show that the forgiving love of God, about which the Christian is sure because of his experience, is in accord with a moral order in which sin brings suffering.